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ABSTRACT

"Cultural relativism" exists when individuals can choose the values and responsible life styles that afford the natural and best vehicles of productive and positive expression. This paper suggests a strategy for accomplishing this kind of cultural acceptance in the present educational system. It calls for the transmission of basic, unbiased data in the classroom; the instruction of students in the tools of critical analysis; and the identification of the philosophical and political values that have emerged throughout time, rather than the indoctrination of certain values. Sharing knowledge, considering culturally different answers to basic questions, and tapping survival experiences are methods the paper suggests for achieving cultural respect and understanding in classroom discussions. (MAI)

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Dr. Cecelia Nails Palmer

"Cultural Relativism: As Strategy for Teaching the "Culturally-Different"

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PALMER

"Cultural Relativism": As Strategy for Teaching the "Culturally Different"

Cultural pluralism has often been misunderstood because of the divisive elements implied in the pejorative connotations of the term. These connotations have encouraged the belief that "Cultural pluralism" involves grouping people into entities without regard for the totality of combined enriched experiences. In this discourse, cultural pluralism refers to the inherent right of an individual to be different, and at the same time a responsible member of the society at large. It implies the "right to one's culture" - a "pride in one's culture and the opportunity of expression through the medium one knows best. It also implies a respect for other cultures, and the right to share in the decision making processes that affect the survival of all. In essence, cultural pluralism relates to the concept of different and legitimate choices.

Scholars of different disciplines often interpret events, according to their perceptions and "value" systems. These dimensions are accepted as intricate components that lead to greater knowledge or new dimensions of learning. In a simplistic analogy, different cultures or ethnic groups may do the same. Relative opportunities should exist for "culturally different" groups to enhance and enrich the total learning experience. In this order, different cultures or ethnic groups can develop the

ability to legitimize and respect differences. It is then imperative that no one group impedes the progress of any other group toward respecting and positively accepting themselves.

Cultural pluralism exists when individuals can choose the values and responsible life styles that afford the natural and best vehicles of productive and positive expression.

The schools, as agents of society, provide many opportunities for "culturally different" groups to acquire the self-concept that can lead to greater proficiency in the basic skills, and a greater propensity to transfer these skills to alternative solutions that may prove workable, in a highly scientific and technological society. It is highly improbable that the schools can conceptualize the society in which our students must function. Therefore, it seems imperative that the agents of education become sensitized to the urgency of motivating the student to use knowledge and skills according to his culturally different societal need. These may provide valid future alternatives. In essence, cultural pluralism implies an acceptance and respect for the "culture and mind of the learner, and therefore an ability to understand and use what the student brings to the situation."[1]

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[1]Herbert Kohl, Reading, How To (New York: Bantam Books, E.P. Dutton and Co., 1974), p. xl.

The role of education is not to program or coerce the culturally different student into a mainstream ideal, which is usually anglo-assimilation.

In this context cultural relativism is legitimized as a strategy or method for teaching the culturally different; relegation of the "basics" to a proper perspective in a culturally pluralistic society could then occur. This strategy is highly plausible since the "melting pot" theory has been discredited and discarded in view of the changing times and conclusive research.

The idea that education is socialization that insists on uniformity and existence in a "social milieu" without question, fails to channel the potential of many minds. In fact, the end product of the educational process has now been recognized by some educators to be something less for those children who come from different cultural backgrounds. For the Blacks, Indians, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans and Orientals, the American educational process has been inadequate. It has simply devaluated and attempted to destroy the cultural uniqueness of these groups. This, in turn, has mis-educated the dominant culture.

The pejorative connotations of labels, such as "culturally deprived," "culturally disadvantaged" and "slow learners," limit the acceptance of cultural divergence. It is increasingly

dysfunctional to think of American culture as a homogeneous set of values or behaviors. "Educational research indicates that it is difficult for most urban children (poor and Black) to make the transition from the home or community to the school...their struggle for survival in the home, community or streets is in real contradiction with the purposes (objectives) and expectations of the schools they attend."[2] However, this same day to day survival experience can provide many rich and varied experiences for the classroom. These can become challenging and worthy in terms of learning for all students. How different cultures relate to the world in which they survive offer the best strategies for teaching the fundamentals or basics, and the universals.

Culture has often been broadly defined to include many differing concepts. Hughes defines Culture as "...a learned configuration of images and other symbolic elements widely shared among members of a given society, which for individuals, functions as an oriental framework for behavior, and for the group serves as the communicational matrix which tends to coordinate behavior."[3] Lisitzky states that culture is "...all the customs - the different ways of behaving and believing - that each society teaches its members..."[4]

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[2]H.B. Pinkney, "Better Teaching: Key to Improving Urban Schools," NASSP Bulletin, Vol. 61, No. 406, (Feb. 1977), p. 28.

[3]Charles C. Hughes, "Lectures in Culture and Personality," (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ., 1968), unpublished.

[4]Gene Lisitzky, Four Ways of Being Human (New York: Viking Press, 1956), p. 14.

In simplistic terms, culture consists of those man-made artifacts, symbols and institutions that man uses to adjust to his environment. "It is man's solution to the problem of survival. Culture is passed on, but not in its entirety, from one generation to the next."[5]

Germaine to these definitions of culture is that culture is a man-made system of artifacts and symbols that highly influence his behavior. Since culture is man-made, students will be able to conclude correctly that cultures vary greatly in different parts of the world, in different societies, and among different peoples. Students should also be helped to understand that a cultural system is an organized pattern or whole. "Thus, any drastic external or internal changes are likely to disrupt the patterning of a culture."[6] The functioning of language is symbolic and "patterning." Students should be led to see how these concepts affect the conceptualization of reality and validity. Since cultures are man-made, the cultural relativist assumes that all cultures are equally valid, and what is "norman" in human life can vary from culture to culture. A person is frequently considered "normal" in his society if he can function adequately, and if most of his characteristics do not differ significantly from those of other people in his culture, who are considered to be normal. When

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[5]James A. Banks, Teaching the Black Experience (California: Fearon Publishers, 1970), p. 37.

[6]Banks, p. 37.

the Hopi Indian danced for rain, he was considered normal. Such behavior would be considered highly abnormal by most Americans. Conversely, the reprimand for misbehavior in the Hopi culture is only a soft, firm phrase that states No-no-no, that is not the Hopi way. Many of the sharp commands and punishment meted out in our schools, would prove to be culture-shock for students with that culture orientation.

Ruth Benedict, who was one of America's most eminent anthropologists, felt that the concept of cultural relativity was needed to help develop tolerance of other peoples and cultures.

> Social thinking at the present time has no more important task before it than of taking adequate account of cultural relativity....We shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope, and as new bases for tolerance the co-existing and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.[7]

The essence of the above concept is that man cannot use standards developed in one culture to justifiably evaluate and judge another culture, that has developed other means to solve the problems of survival. Likewise, he cannot determine what is "primitive" or "normal" in one culture and the society in which it is embedded, on the basis of the standards of another culture.

Cultural Relativism, then, is the concept that allows the "culturally different" power in the decision-making process and

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[7]Ruth Benedick, Patterns of Culture (New York: Mentor Books, 1959), p. 239-40.

rejects the conventional wisdom of a one-dimensional stance. It threatens the hiearchy of the American standard and gives credence to thinking about "low probability events in the future. Differences must be respected and it is self-defeating to program learning and movement in the same direction simultaneously."[8]

Alvin Toffler, the author of Future Shock, predicts that basic changes must and will be made in our work habits, educational systems, and where and how we live. These Culturally different students through Cultural relativism, may offer many solutions for the continuing present and future dilemna. It becomes increasingly imperative that we recognize the multi-dimensional pressures of a global society. We are no longer free to act as if we are contained in a glass menagerie. Through the value systems of culturally different students, we may be able to relate workable concepts to different circumstances with a changed consciousness.

The need for cultural relativism, as a strategy for educating future generations is clearly established. Margaret Mead suggests that a look at the so-called primitive culture in Samoa might suggest useful methods in dealing with the romanticized adolescent stage in our highly technological society. In essence she believes that "People are becoming less than they might be...because we understand so little about what a difference culture can make in terms of stress and strain, in individual fulfillment or defeat."[9]

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[8]Alvin Toffler, "Lecture on Future Shock," (Tulsa, Okla.: University of Tulsa, Oct. 18, 1977), unpublished.

[9]Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 12.

Stokely Carmaichael, Black Scholar and Activist, predicts a 'redistribution of power,' on the continent through the third world concept, and reiterates that "Education is the result of the struggling of people all over the world and belong to all the people. He insists that the 'culturally different' through 'cultural relativism' must understand their true historic role in devising solutions for their survival."[10] Implications are that we should encourage our students to share knowledge instead of "hoarding" it in order to claim artificial superiority over other students. Tangible suggestions would include frequent utilization of "peer" instruction and the sharing of different ideas, about the same topic. Students must be encouraged to contemplate totally different solutions to problems. These solutions, may in turn, offer answers to many of the problems that are existing in our classrooms today. Especially is this true in the English and Language Arts classrooms, since Language is culture. In this connection, Mr. Carmaichael stated that in Guinea (Africa) a so-called primitive culture, there is no incidence of rape of women. Perhaps that society, and those of African descent, have creative solutions to some of the problems in this highly technologized society. Opportunities must be provided for the "culturally different" student to develop his rich and varied experience and channel this development into productive and useful forces. Toffler refers to present and future needs of

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[10]Stokely Carmaichael, "Lecture on Pan-Africanism" (Tulsa, Okla.: University of Tulsa, Oct. 10, 1977), unpublished.

restructuring the family, since there must be viable alternatives to the nuclear family because the (aggregate) family is a reality.[11] Margaret Mead delineates the "communes, three-way marriages, lesbian and homosexual alliances,"[12] as different life-styles that are present now and threaten acceptability in the future. The effect of these changes will permeate the school setting, regardless of the attempts to ignore or deny the existence of these different life styles. Rhetorically, how will these changes affect our connotative view of the concepts of the "broken-home," "fatherless children," "matriarchal families," "day care centers," "working mothers," etc., when compiling the cumulative record and rationalizing the reasons "Why students fail?"

Alex Haley's Roots, with its emphasis on cultural heritage, has implied that a recognition of the strengths of the African cultural heritage might relieve the schizophrenia that many times besets the "Black Afro-Saxon,"[13] (who apparently has made it), and some Blacks (who have not made it) in this society. This theme is not new for it has been reiterated in the Black poetry and literature of the 60's; The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse, The Black Bourgeoise by Frazier, Black Rage by Grier and Cobbs, Black Self-Concept by Banks and Grambs, The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon, Teaching the Unteachable,

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[11]Alvin Toffler, "Lecture on Future Shock," (Tulsa, Okla.: University of Tulsa, Oct. 18, 1977), unpublished.

[12]Margaret Mead, Family: Life Styles of the Future, Film (Tulsa City County Library, Tulsa, Okla.), #412L.

[13]"Black Anglo-Saxon" - term coined by Dr. Joyce Hughes, Northwestern Univ.; Chicago, Ill. and used in address to Tulsa Urban League, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1977.

36 Children, Reading - How To, and Math, Writing and Games by Herbert Kohl and our own NCTE statement on The Student's Right to Their Own Language.

The culturally different student differs radically from the suburban, middle-class (usually Caucasian) student. We find only limited educational research objectively comparing educational success or failure among the "culturally different" to their counterparts in mainstream America, or the dominant culture. Assuming that the dominant culture is found mainly in the suburban or private schools (and not in the inner city), "A wealth of recent research indicates that children in suburban or private schools score much higher on standardized tests."[14] Such research has enabled Americans to conclude erroneously that the "culturally different" student has a low I.Q. and is generally inferior. The self-fulfilling prophecy[15] and the "Halo Effect"[16] compounded by cognitive dissonance[17] combine to dehumanize the student under the guise of quality education. Those who do survive are indeed the "super-stars" of any era. The fact that we have many is silent testimony to resources that have not been used in our schools.

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[14]H.B. Pinkney, "Urban Education: The Committed", Peabody Journal of Education, Vol. 53, No. 1, (Oct. 1975), p. 51.

[15]Rosenthal and Jacobson (1967).

[16]Personification of One's Value System.

[17]Cherished Idea or Belief Clashes with a new or Different Idea or Belief.

> "Dr. Helen Redbird tells a classic story that underscores the absurdity of concepts such as "school oriented children and "Readiness to learn." Dr. Redbird, professor at the Oregon College of Education visited an elementary school to inquire about the progress of a little American Indian boy. She was told by the boy's teacher that he was doing poorly in class. The teacher explained that he appeared disinterested in learning, perhaps unwilling to learn. Dr. Redbird, who is an Indian, asked to remove the boy from the classroom for a few days to see if she couldn't get him "ready to learn." The teacher granted permission, and after a few days of "motivating" the student, Dr. Redbird returned him to class. About a week later Dr. Redbird inquired about the boy's progress. Not to her surprise, he was doing excellently and his teacher was amazed with the results. Unknown to the teacher, Dr. Redbird had taught the little boy two things: To smile and to nod his head in response to his teacher. When the boy had mastered these two acts of accommodation, his teacher was convinced of his willingness to learn! Neither smiling nor nodding was part of the little boy's culture, but until he was taught to behave in ways that signaled his desire to learn, he was abandoned."[18]

Another example is that sometimes Indian children are punished by teachers for lowering their heads when the teacher speaks to them. Thinking that the children are being disrespectful, the teachers often punish them for displaying the very behavior their parents have identified as respectful. In at least one Indian culture, lowering one's head acknowledges respect for the speaker. Teachers who are unaware of this cultural practice are unknowingly coercing Indian children to show disrespect.

The once-familiar practice of punishing children whose first language is not English is becoming obsolete. The practice of punishing children for

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[18]Donald H. Smith, "The Black Revolution and Education," Black Self-Concept (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), p. 47.

speaking Spanish is culturally undemocratic. The child who has been taught all his life in Spanish probably feels very uncomfortable even terrified, when suddenly required to abandon all of his home schooling. Knowledge of the Spanish language is, moreover, an extremely important part of the Mexican-American culture. Whatever his intentions, anyone who keeps a Mexican-American (or Puerto-Rican) child from learning or valuing Spanish has unknowingly created many painful social problems for the child.

This classic story could be duplicated again and again for Blacks, Chicano's, Puerto Ricans, Orientals - and perhaps many others who are linked by the common bond of poverty.

"America is pluralistic, but traditional literary studies and the educational system have been based upon an ethnocentric and homogeneous set of values that reveal only one aspect of man and society, greatly limiting knowledge of cultures and literatures outside the dominant group."[19] As a result, the literatures of the culturally different groups have been overlooked, underrepresented, and devaluated.

The following is one example of these inequities.

> Prior to the twentieth century, cotton was the major crop of the Southeastern United States; however, in the early 1900's a tiny insect called the cotton boll weevil threatened to wipe out the cotton crops. A young agricultural scientist named George Washington Carver urged farmers to plan different crops. Peanuts were one of the suggested crops.

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[19]Dexter Fisher, "Introduction," Minority Language and Literature, (New York: MLA Asso. of America, 1977), p. 7.

The problem was, however, there was little demand for peanuts. Carver took the peanut apart and discovered what it was made of. He took the oils, gums, resings, sugars, starches, fats, and other substances organic to the peanut, and put them back together in different ways to discover new uses for the plant.

Among the products of the peanut were peanut milk, butter, cheese, a coffee substitute, ink, soap, flour, bleach, face cream, salves, synthetic rubber, linoleum, shaving cream and dozens of others. In all, Carver discovered over 300 products from his peanut research. Additionally, he discovered over 100 useful products from the sweet potato. His ideas helped to diversify the crops of the South and to extend the use of Southern agricultural products.

In one community, Enterprise, Alabama, the cotton crop was completely destroyed in 1915, but new crops (mostly peanuts and sweet potatoes) were introduced bringing renewed prosperity. To commemorate the event, the Boll Weevil Monument was built (in 1919) and is still standing today. It seems incredible, this community should pay tribute to the insect which almost destroyed them rather than to the man who saved them -- George Washington Carver -- (A Black man!)

SOURCES: Encyclopedia Americana (1963) and Collier's Encyclopedia (1959).

Like Black and Native American history and literature, the Chicano historical and literary contributions have suffered the same exclusion and distortion. In fact, minority literature has not had access to the educational institutions in America. Despite obstacles, minority literarure must be included in the curriculum; it must be given the same validity and respect that is given to the literature of the dominant culture. It is evident that diversity is everywhere; although tolerated in theory it is punished in practice. Some way we must close the gap.

Schools must change. Curriculums must be designed to separate fact from fiction and reality from myth. Facts and knowledge must relate to reality. Materials should be designed to develop the ability to interpret data free of a narrow personal value perspective. The school must encourage free and independent thinkers and discourage a "tunnerl-vi[illegible]" vision of the world. The goal of education must become involved in expanding the mind to foster creativity.

The educational process must become actively involved in the following:

1. Transmittal of basic, unbiased data
2. Instruction in the tools of critical analysis
3. Identification of philosophical and political values which have emerged throughout time, - [illegible] not indoctrination of certain values.

Teachers must change. They must do some soul searching. They must change negative attitudes toward "culturally-different" groups in order to create a positive atmosphere for the acceptance of differences in the classroom. Teacher training institutions should chart the course. The "inquiry" method should be used frequently to make students aware that written materials are records of events presented from the point of view of the persons who wrote them. Different cultures will treat an event different ways -- and in equally valid ways. In utilizing the inquiry approach, students should be led to identify problems, formulate hypotheses, collect data, evaluate evidence in terms of credence and relevance and draw

conclusions related to the hypothesis. Slides, music, folk-lore, art, simulation games, sociodramas, case studies, urban studies, etc., should be used extensively. The urban environment should be used as a learning resource and students should participate in observing and solving real-life environmental problems. The book Yellow Pages of Learning Resources by Richard Soul Wurman, is recommended for the interested teacher who would like to involve his class in learning experiences which utilize the urban environment. "The most important steps are to involve oneself in the local community, identify the local community, concerns and problems, and then gradually involve the class in a discovery, discussion, and contribution process utilizing the urban environment."[20]

Toffler suggests a "council of the future,"[21] composed of students to challenge thinking in non-traditional ways. Examples of some possible subjects are: the energy problem, ocean development for cities, studies from science fiction, the interests and survival experiences of different cultures, the positive contributions of different cultures and the "cultural universals."[22] The list is endless, when the experiences of the students are used to teach the basic concepts. This is teaching the Basics in a new key. I agree with Kohl when he states, "...the way they

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[20]Edward L. Stranix, "A Philadelphia School Study about Attitude Change in Inner City Students," Education, Vol. 96, No. 1, Fall, 1975, pp. 95-100.

[21]Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 404.

[22]Social scientists have found that certain institutions exist in all human cultures, although they may take diverse forms. Such institutions are called "cultural universals."

(the basics) had been emphasized in the past was precisely what had led to failure. The question of the need to acquire basic skills is often confused with the question of how these skills are to be acquired."[23]

The classroom, then, should be willing to examine off-beat possibilities - even if they have a low probability ratio in the dominant culture. Through cultural relativism this is possible and becomes probable when we respect the language, opinions, and the life styles of the "culturally different" in our classrooms.

In essence, the writer proposes that the internal and external pressures to change the balance of the economic power in this country augment essential changes in the American structure. Education is one segment that will experience the most radical change, since the school is used to transmit the values of a changing and complex society. Cultural relativism as a method or strategy is valid as one of the tools for channeling the intellect, creativity and knowledge of a neglected segment of our society into productive channels that will benefit us all. America has no choice. Only a culturally pluralistic society, with cultural relativism as a focus or strategy, can now exist.

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[23]Herbert Kohl, Reading - How To (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 192.